

## Submission – Inquiry into the Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families

### 1. The financial, social and personal cost to families who have a member(s) using illicit drugs, including the impact of drug induced psychoses or other mental disorders:

To live through drug use and watch a much loved son almost destroy him self and our family is so difficult to fully explain. To feel the devastation and isolation of what to do? Who will listen? Who will understand our pain and with out the constant platitudes of "Well I wouldn't put up with that – I'd kick him out and let him hit rock bottom, me unable to ask – 'tell me what is rock bottom', we are so fragile. Would this allow me to sleep through the night – to worry less? This sensitive 33 year old man – sports loving, many friendships, much loved by his family, married, two children 3 and 6, a very successful business with his wife – but unhappy in his personal life, to say I was flummoxed is to understate my feelings as he called me on the phone as I welcomed friends for dinner- he living two hours way – this man who never smoked, loathed drugs – even aspirin – but somehow I had to deal with it and get through that evening and the years ahead.

I went to anything and everything often on my own but also as a complete family – we were going to fix this – on this journey I learnt much about myself even though we were then a very close unit. I found we each have our own way of dealing with such – mine as his mum had to learn what would be best to get him back. Possibly the most important thing was 'We can only change ourselves' learn other ways to help. During this period my son's heroin use rose to \$250 a day – had opened another business as well as the other, this would give him money for his habit so as not to steal from his family. He was so filled with guilt – tried counseling, detoxed often – we had trust between us but of course all was never completely exposed, constantly losing things or saying he was robbed, My husband, his Dad, asking (loving this person so much) 'How are you mate' with the constant a reply "I'm find Dad' which was what he wanted to hear, but we never gave up. I found Family Drug Support, trained to go on the phone, to help others which in turn helped me so much. This is the most important community work I've ever been involved with and shall continue for as long as I'm of value. He never stole from anyone, only himself and family. I learnt to rethink things, turn them around, like saying as he didn't commit crime – 'You were lucky you had the money' he quickly replying 'How unlucky I was to have it'. One learns to never say never. I remember finding a used needle as I opened his car door, he had lost his license and at this time he was clean? Or seemed to be. I just showed it to him, he was in shock and tried to explain, I didn't react – just said 'but it was me who noticed it' and left it at that. These outings together keeping him as safe as we could, allowing him to talk if he needed to, not lots of questions and rarely any outbursts. I questioned his body odour – he saying 'I like it'. He called asking if he could come home for a while, he was sick. "of course darling". I then didn't know how or what I should or do or what was best for us both, stay with him or go out to give him space, so I learnt from FDS to ask him, then knowing that I couldn't stop him using, he stating, 'better if you stay with me'. This went on for us all, detoxing often, me learning more – after about six years he made a decision 'It's

just too hard' and didn't want methadone and on his own he went cold turkey. His wife would bring him soup but he basically did it alone. We also stayed close in our own way, always available for him and his family and still the same today. Now four years plus he has been completely free of drugs, saying after heroin he smoked cannabis – this was far more difficult to get off than heroin. He has cured himself of Hep C with diet and healthily living, swims, runs and surfs etc. knows his limits, goes to NA still knowing this was his savior. Yes I could have lived life without drugs, but believe me they have enriched my life, but don't ever want to go (or have my son) through it again.

#### Social Cost of drug use.

This differs for each person, family or drug user. You learn about friendships, who to tell or when, who will stand back fearful it will be catching or maybe knowing something is happening within their own family! You see people speaking behind a hand or in a corner. The look people can give almost saying well I of course that will never happen in our family- you must have done something to have this happen

Family get-togethers can be difficult, those who know and understand and others thinking, saying what's going on with him and the one using drugs uncomfortable both judging each other trying to make some kind of conversation. Fear brings out the best and worst in people, some just run and don't want to hear the truth. Many gossip and pry others so unaware of what to say or think. Sometimes you stay away, it's just too hard for everyone and of course they could dob us if I say too much. One must learn about what happens with drug misuse. If unable to deal with it just give others including the user, a hug, possibly words like "it must be very difficult for all".

#### Mental Illness etc

I feel extremely fortunate we didn't experience such long term effects, but my youngest sister hasn't been so lucky. Her lovely sweet talented 34 (now) year old daughter has been left with a life long mental illness. Constant injections to keep her stable. After constant cannabis misuse from a young age (16-17) her life is empty – no friends, no relationships, no interests ect. I cannot imagine how my sister copes, it has affected her health and husband's as they try to invite their daughter into the business – very difficult as she is inclined not to finish any thing – will she take her life at some time? Always possible they know and this is only one case and her family care and are able to watch her most of the time. Have learnt with harm minimisation and motivational talk to let go as much as is possible to do – almost accepting what could happen but of course never be prepared for whatever this may be or when it could. A real waiting game with a script! She, as a coping mum, is excluded from information about the state of her daughter or even rarely included in asking her questions – time is limited with the medical people – some great, others just too busy and constant changing of staff, if she is locked up, they have found matches and scissors in her bag – so much for keeping them safe. She (daughter) saying "I must have these because of what often happens inside". The guilt she put on her parents for putting her there, so she stays silent when she is in a manic state, they hide things so well until it erupts.

## 2. The impact of harm minimisation programs on families;

**Harm minimisation** to me as a parent of a drug user for 6 years and clean now for over 4, a nephew who died from heroin 10 years ago, a niece (34) with mental illness, I firmly believe my learning and using harm minimisation has resulted with our son's return to health. At 44 years of age, he has reclaimed his former life, cured himself of ---of course this never just happens – trust in oneself and others is what this method (harm minimisation) gives out, more flies with honey than vinegar I believe – a heavy hand with no room for movement is dangerous territory! I've found that the 'tough love' and 'zero tolerance' method, from my experience is a no-go method to stop drug misuse. Harm minimisation teaches trust, to be open, talk about them, to share without being negatively judged. To learn a better way to explain, to ask questions, to show care, to trust and be open. "Stand naked" I often say and that's not always a pretty sight if one does not see from the inside out. No one can possibly feel another's pain; they must be able to explain it themselves. It also teaches us we have a responsibility to others who could get into trouble with drug misuse. To walk away, leave them in danger, suffer psychosis or even worse, death alone, and to call for help with charges. My nephew may still be alive today if this had happened. He died alone, while friends went for Pizza, he was 36. In those times we didn't talk about drug use, it only happened to the unloved, bad background people. Well, he wasn't one of these and his family live with his death every day. Harm minimisation gives and brings freedom to love the one using drugs, this is only a small part of him. While also understanding it has taken over his life and ours. It helps by allowing families to nurture themselves on a regular basis. No one can take that small pleasure from us, e.g. a walk, sunset or sunrise, facial once a month was my way. If money a problem, mince and sausages won't hurt the family. It (harm minimisation) also teaches us to call for help from those we trust to unwind. This is where Family Drug Support is so helpful and their Stepping Stones program, structured and conducted with group, so shared wisdom is within. Knowing how others manage, and friendships are formed with those who understand harm minimisation methods and it gives us strength. Motivational interviewing methods can be called on, not questioning in an angry mode, allowing the drug user to answer if they have the trust harm minimisation can bring. It also allows us to explain our feelings, express guilt that we may feel, explain our anger and fears for their safety. Talk and discuss money in the night time, yes, it is about timing in all things. To be better equipped, to set boundaries but only ones you believe that can help. They can also ask you about what boundaries we may be able to use – almost like an unwritten contract but trust is the way, to give privacy for each one. What can we do if we search rooms, invade bathrooms or closed doors, will that stop them from using? To be able to get others to make wiser choices and think about consequences at such times. To express our feelings about their safety and respect us as parents and other family feelings etc. To talk about crime, eating well, effects, health problems (that so often happen), safety, police and using alone. There is so much harm minimisation looks at when it's understood and even so there are times it won't work but one learns it's the only way and so we continue it and yes I'm sure it works. It empowers loved ones to re-think things and talk without more guilt. I so believe drug users are

not happy long-term people. I've met many at N.A. meetings and on the phone line etc. Harm minimisation helped me not to give up; the person was just as important to us. It helped us reclaim our lives – different, yes. One is never quite the same after such an experience, but I have learnt so much that my life is enriched and how I have grown over these years and continue at 71 yrs of age, life is pretty good. One learns to handle problems in such a different way, worry less and concentrate on the important things like my family.

**3. Ways to strengthen families who are coping with a member(s) using illicit drugs.**

Organisations like Family Drug Support need to be resourced to continue their wonderful work.

Assistance with crisis intervention and giving families respite would make a huge difference to people I talk to on the telephone line.



Patsy Hersee